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There were meetings. There were more meetings. One caucus met and the other got ready to meet. There were phone calls. There was high-level intervention.

Heading into Friday's expected vote on the Senate-passed financial bailout bill, House leaders said they were optimistic about getting enough votes for passage, but they were whipping as though it was still too close to call.

Speaker

Nancy Pelosi

, D-Calif., and Majority Leader

Steny H. Hoyer

, D-Md., said they won't bring the bill (HR 1424) to the floor unless they are sure that this time, they have the votes.

"We are optimistic, very cautiously so, that we can get there," said Majority Whip

James E. Clyburn

, D-S.C.

The Republican whip team seemed to focus on lower-ranking members of the leadership, friends of Minority Leader

John A. Boehner

and others who had seemed to waiver before voting against the previous bailout plan.

Pressure was on Rep.

Tom Cole

of Oklahoma, who heads the National Republican Congressional Committee, as well as on ranking Republican members of House committees and subcommittees, such as Doc Hastings of Washington (ethics), Steve Buyer of Indiana (Veterans' Affairs), Peter Hoekstra of Michigan (Intelligence), John L. Mica of Florida (Transportation and Infrastructure) and Judy Biggert of Illinois (a Financial Services subcommittee).

Several members of the Republican Main Street Partnership were being lobbied hard, including Phil English, Todd Platts, Jim Gerlach and Charlie Dent, all of Pennsylvania.

Also being lobbied was one of Boehner's close friends — Tom Latham, R-Iowa — and a half-dozen members of the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC):

Steve Pearce of New Mexico, who is running for Senate; Robert B. Aderholt of Alabama; Phil Gingrey and Jack Kingston, both of Georgia; Michael McCaul of Texas; Cliff Stearns of Florida; and Michael R. Turner of Ohio.

During a floor vote Oct. 1, Boehner worked on freshman

Rob Wittman

, R-Va., while standing next to a back-row leather chair. “He said whatever I decide, I should be able to give a rational explanation back home,” Wittman said.

Longtime observers compared the whipping effort to another showdown vote 18 years ago — the 1990 budget deal violating the “no new taxes” pledge of President George Bush (PL 101-508).

The fight became a milestone in the climb to power of an upstart GOP whip from Georgia named Newt Gingrich (1957-1995) who would become Speaker of the House.

Like the 1990 fight, the current battle has driven a deep wedge into the GOP. And it has intensified frictions among lawmakers who are preparing both for a tough re-election season and a new round of leadership elections after that.

Big Stakes for Conservative Faction

One focus of attention was the 106-member RSC, whose chairman, Jeb Hensarling of Texas, has been leading a rump campaign to defeat the package.

Hensarling faced an energetic counter-campaign from colleague

John Campbell

, R-Calif., who hoped to peel away some of the 82 RSC members who opposed the earlier bill.

The fight carries big stakes for Campbell, an accountant whose district has been hard hit by subprime mortgage woes. He has been vying for an endorsement from seven RSC leaders to be Hensarling's successor, and both of his rivals —

Marsha Blackburn

of Tennessee and

Tom Price

of Georgia — voted "no" on Sept. 29.

Some of Boehner's most promising prospects were members of the Republican Main Street Partnership, who stopped short of endorsing the Senate-passed bill, but praised several of its provisions.

"I like the increase in the cap on deposit insurance," Dent said.

"I'm not going to show my hand. . . . But I do believe it's essential we move something this week," English said.

Eric Cantor

of Virginia, the chief deputy whip, said Sen.

John McCain

of Arizona, the GOP presidential nominee, was continuing to make calls urging Republicans to support the bill.

"He's been behind the scenes talking to members all week, telling them the urgency of the situation," Cantor said.

Rep.

Edolphus Towns

, D-N.Y., said a number of Democrats had received calls from their party's presidential nominee, Sen.

Barack Obama

of Illinois, who, like McCain, voted for the bill Oct. 1.

Rep.

Bobby L. Rush

, D-Ill., said he was still undecided despite getting a call from Obama. "The Senate made it a better bill, more palatable for poor people," Rush said. But he would like assurances that Congress will return to the topic next year and "do something to ensure that people who are in foreclosure or face foreclosure have adequate protections."

Clyburn said some members of the Congressional Black Caucus like the new version of the bill better than the first iteration because the Senate added an extension of property-tax breaks for non-itemizing tax filers.

"The fact that it is coming back in the package will be very helpful," Clyburn said.

Aides counted at least seven converts — five Republicans and two Democrats.

They included

Jim Ramstad

, R-Minn.;

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

, R-Fla.;

John Shadegg

, R-Ariz.;

John Sullivan

, R-Okla.;

Zach Wamp

, R-Tenn.;
Shelley Berkley
, D-Nev.; and
Emanuel Cleaver II
, D-Mo.

"I'm concerned about what's going to happen to the economy. That overrides the odor of this bill," Wamp said.

Ramstad switched after getting a deal on his mental health parity bill, now included in the package. "I've reassessed my position in light of mental healthy parity and tax relief," he said.

"It's hard to turn members around after they have voted no. You've got to have substantive changes in the bill," said former Rep. Robert S. Walker, R-Pa. (1977-97), chairman of Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates. "It won't be easy. But the one thing that can spur a Republican to vote yes is tax cuts."

Still, Boehner continued to face tough going even with friends, such as Bob Latta
, R-Ohio, who represents a neighboring district.

"If they haven't resolved the issues I had with the bill, I think I've probably got to vote no," said Latta. "I like John. This is not a referendum on John."

Like many of the foes of the bill, Latta said most of the constituent calls to his office continued to run heavily against the measure, even through some callers had also expressed concern about the volatility in the stock market.

Iowa's Latham, one of Boehner's best friends, declined to say how he would vote.

"I've got to look at my district, and at the issues. It a tough decision," Latham said.

Another longtime Boehner ally who remained on the fence described the conversation he had with the top Republican. "He told me he knew he would lose some of the knuckle-draggers, but when he lost me, he knew there was a big problem," said the lawmaker, who did not want to be identified.

Boehner's campaign to woo defectors was complicated by a late-moving splinter group led by Steven C. LaTourette, R-Ohio, and Spencer Bachus, R-Ala., the ranking member on Financial Services.

They sought an amendment that would require the \$700 billion to be broken into an initial installment of \$250 billion and then doled out in \$50 billion monthly increments, each requiring a separate vote of approval by Congress.

"We have 15 members who voted no that support this. They have committed that if this is made in order and passes, they will vote yes and help to provide the margin for passage," LaTourette said.

He said Boehner had been neutral on the proposal, even though the White House opposed it. "He has always said, 'Do what you have to do. Vote your conscience,' " LaTourette said.